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Electronic democracy

The PEN is mighty

LOS ANGELES

IN THE private sector, the results of the "paperless revolution" have been mixed. But at least companies have tried to use computers to make life easier for their customers. Governments, on the other hand, have tended to hoard their computers in secret: deploying technology to defend their citizens, to spy on them and to calculate their taxes. Now there is a crack in this electronic wall. In California some local governments are offering their citizens the chance to talk to them by computer.

"Electronic democracy" is inspired by two overlapping dislikes—of bureaucrats and of politicians—and by two ideas for making these groups more likeable. The first conjures up a world where the grumpy civil servant behind a counter is replaced by an easy-to-follow screen that makes all the government's information available at the touch of a button. The second idea wants to make politicians as answerable and accessible to their constituents as Pericles was to the tiny Athenian democracy.

California's state government has recently installed 15 "Info/California" machines in San Diego and Sacramento. Each contains a push-button video screen to guide the user. Most of the instructions and pictures are stored on laser-discs, but the kiosk also contains a computer connected to the state's databank. Below the screen is a printer, and a slot for inserting credit-cards and California's machine-readable driving licences.

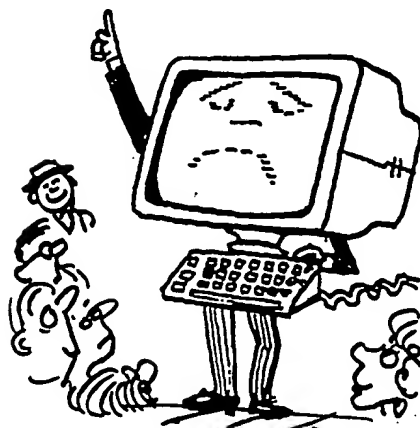
In the first two months of operation, more than 36,000 Californians used the machines. Half of them said that it had saved a telephone call, a letter or a trip to a government office. At the moment, most requests are for information. But the system also offers an interactive "job-match" programme—asking users for pertinent personal details, and then informing them about suitable jobs from the state employment agency's database. By May, users will be able to order birth certificates and renew their vehicle registrations. Soon they should be able to pay traffic fines with credit cards and order personalised licence plates. With thumb-print-verification gadgets added, the machines could allow freed prisoners to contact their parole officers without having to call in person.

Little of the technology in the Info/California kiosks is new. A smaller five-kiosk system is already running in Hawaii, and there are "24-hour City Halls" in several other American towns. Info/California stands out because it wants to do business with its customers as well as to inform them, and also because of the scope of its backers' ambitions. So far Info/California has cost the state only \$300,000, because the machines, the software and the initial development costs (together worth around \$3m) have been donated by North Communications, a software company based in Santa Monica, and IBM. This is the sprat to catch a mackerel. If the trial is a success, they hope to build a bigger system—and to profit by it.

A 5,000-kiosk statewide system would, with the development work already done, cost around \$20m. Its backers claim it would repay the investment within five years by saving time, paperwork and (though they are quieter about this) civil-service jobs. Job matching, for instance, costs \$150 to do by hand. By machine it is only \$40. It is not only the state government that would benefit. Federal organisations which do a lot of business directly with the public, such as the Department of Labour, are also interested in sharing it.

It remains to be seen whether the deficit-ridden state of California is prepared to invest in such a futuristic idea. Others are taking a more modest approach. The city of Santa Monica has installed what it calls the Public Electronic Network (PEN). This links 30 public computer terminals with 600 in City Hall and 4,000 private computer users. It has no fancy video gadgets, and costs the city around \$100,000 a year. Its most popular role seems to be as an electronic debating chamber—with up to 60 people sending each other messages on any subject from the homeless to the Simpsons. As the system's architect, Ken Phillips, admits: "Our goal is not to decrease bureaucracy but to increase communication."

This sounds like fun, but is hard to justify economically. Some City Hall staff grumble that they spend too much of their time answering PEN messages from electronically loquacious citizens. Santa Monica's inhabitants are unusually wealthy computer-literate and socially concerned Irvine—a city equally wealthy, but located in conservative Orange county—rejected a similar system as frivolous and expensive. In Santa Monica, PEN has also made enemies. Some politicians have resigned from it, citing the rudeness of many of their correspondents. Pericles would have been a little braver.



EXHIBIT

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